



Nature stories for young readers

A STRANGE REQUEST

VIDYA AND RAJARAM SHARMA

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Online

A PARTNERSHIP FOR TEACHERS, CHILDREN AND EDUCATION

The story is based on observations made at an institutional campus in South Delhi during the years 2011 - 2017.

The nest in the story was started on 20th February 2012.

Photographs in this book may not show the actual size of birds or their nests.



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“Please stop!”

I turned around but found nobody.

“Strange,” I said to myself, “am I imagining or did I indeed hear somebody!”





Lady Magpie Robin

As I continued, I heard the request again.

When I turned to look the second time, I found a whole lot of birds watching me. Some three White Eyes, Lady Magpie Robin, a pair of Redvented Bulbuls, a Tailorbird and not to mention a Ring-necked Dove, a couple of Mynas and even a Brown-headed Barbet; all of them watching me closely!

Being watched is not a nice feeling and I felt

very uncomfortable.

I looked at them somewhat stupidly, wondering what prompted all of them to stop whatever they were doing to put me under such surveillance.

“Do listen to him,” urged White Eye, gently.

White Eyes are small birds, perhaps a little bigger than Tailorbirds. They are never still



White Eye



and keep flitting about. I always wonder how they can ever spot whatever they need to eat and eat it too without slowing down. But here were three of them, perched perfectly still and one of them even imploring me to stop!

“Listen to whom?” I asked, trying to make sense of this very unusual situation.

“To me ... you see, my wife needs it,” said a small bird meekly. The bird looked funny or

sick or both. I was speechless for a while. When I found my tongue I managed to ask who his wife was and burst out laughing uncontrollably at his reply.

“Ho ... Ho! Look at you!” I exclaimed, “You ... a Purple Sunbird? Whoever says so?”

Lady Purple Sunbird made an appearance just then with a tiny piece of string in her beak. “Don’t you upset him,” she thundered.



Lady Purple Sunbird



Her scolding was so severe that the string fell off her beak. What upset her more, I cannot say, for she flew away immediately. Mr. Purple Sunbird however stayed perched on the Madhumalati climber, sulking enormously.

What was I to do? I waited undecidedly. Lady Purple Sunbird reappeared, this time with some dried grass! With a crisp *wich*, she dashed in between the many thick vines of the climber. Before I could even see where she

went, she dashed out, again with exactly the same *wich*. It was quick, so quick that I didn't know where to look.

"Phew!" I exclaimed. "Now this is something."

No guesses here. She was making a nest. But where? I peered into the entangled vines. Though mostly leafless now, with just a few red tinged shiny green new shoots emerging here and there, I found no nest.





January and early February days are usually very cold. Birds hardly call. As days get warmer, they start one by one. Barbets, Hornbills, Pied Mynas, Ring-necked Doves, Magpie Robins and soon the smaller birds—Bulbuls, Purple Sunbirds, Prinias; and by mid Feb, with spring in the air, the bird world is once again full of sound.

With the sounds, come nesting time. I knew this well. How many nests have I not

Coppersmith Barbet

discovered! But here I was totally lost. A bird building a nest right under my nose and I couldn't find it!

Luckily, Lady Purple Sunbird returned. This time, I took care to see where she went.

"No wonder!" I exclaimed, totally satisfied. I was looking for a nest. The usual pouch like nest of sunbirds, its side entrance protected by a hood. Dangling. But what I saw here was





Red-vented Bulbul

nothing like what I had seen earlier; just a few threads, bark pieces, pieces of paper and such rubbish. No pouch and definitely no protective hood. The nest was just begun. No wonder I had not spotted it.

“A long way to go,” I said to myself.

“Yes. About two weeks! That is —”

“Two weeks?” I interrupted Bulbul.

“What did you expect? Two months!”
Tailorbird jeered.

“Oh! Stop it,” Bulbul admonished Tailorbird
and continued. “A tiny bird, she is, smaller
than any one of us here. How much can she
carry anyway? And her nest is certainly
elaborate! That's —”

Bulbul was interrupted again, this time by
White Eye: “By that standard, two weeks is



Tailorbird



Brown-headed Barbet

pretty much a short period. Unlike us, she builds all by herself. But you can help her, you see ... don't ... please don't make her go far in search of nest materials," she pleaded, eyeing me hopefully.

"What! You expect me to collect all that rubbish for her?" I asked in disbelief.

Stunned silence. All of them stared at me open mouthed.

Barbet gave me a 'how stupid can you be' look and decided to fly away.

The rest, every single one of them, suddenly got interested in some leaf or insect or remembered something or the other. Ring-necked Dove seemed to have discovered that preening time was long overdue and began preening vigorously. But no matter what they were doing, they continued to keep an eye on me.



Ring-necked Dove



“Silly birds,” I said to myself and decided to ignore them.

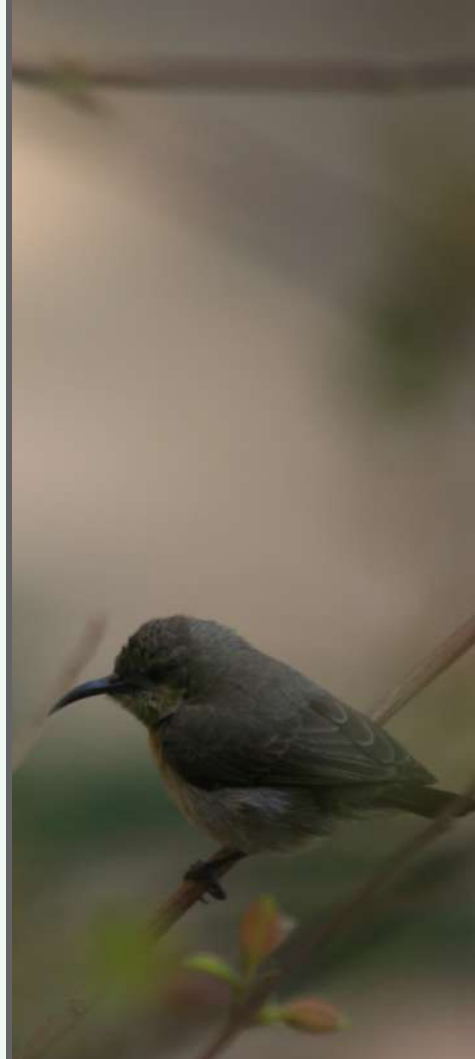
Lady Purple Sunbird returned with a bark piece.

“Is Mr. Purple Sunbird sick?” I whispered, not wanting him to hear me.

“No ... changing his dress.” That was all she could find time to say.

She was too busy flying in and out with whatever she could carry in her fine beak. But every time she returned, she was kind enough to spare a second or so to tell me about Mr. Purple Sunbird's weird dress. She used so few words that I had to struggle to understand. Finally, I pieced everything together.

Mr. Purple Sunbird is not always purple but becomes purple in the nesting season. Otherwise, at other times, he looks much like





Lady Purple Sunbird. But she has the same dress always.

“Then will he soon become uniformly purple?” I asked, making sure that Mr. Purple Sunbird was nowhere near.

“Uniformly purple? Yes and no,” she declared.

I sighed heavily. If only birds could explain a bit better!

Mr. Purple Sunbird came back after a while. I apologized for laughing at him. "I don't know much about you birds, you see," I tried to explain.

And that's when he got angry. Terribly angry. "You will, if you care!" he admonished. "And you will let things be, if you care."

"But ... what have I done?" I mumbled, exhibiting my confusion.





Mr. Sunbird was so angry, he could say nothing more.

I looked around. The other birds were watching me. They all looked angry and I could not figure out why they were unhappy with me. I felt miserable and didn't know what to do.

Deep in thought, I silently watched Lady Purple Sunbird build her nest. It was the same

process. A *wich* or two before approaching the nest, poke in whatever she had brought, hardly spending more than a couple of seconds and exiting as quickly as she came, again saying the same *wich*. I was surprised at how everything stuck together. Never would anything fall off!

Though she worked alone, Mr. Purple Sunbird kept an eye on the whole process. Sometimes, he would perch on the wire above, sometimes on the climber itself and sometimes examine





his wife's work in her absence.

Many a time, he would come along with her and perch close to the nest. That's when he would pleasantly chit-chat with her, soft and nice. But sometimes, when she was far away, he would call out in a high pitch, fluttering his wings rapidly. It sounded as though he was yelling at her to work faster but I am sure he was just too excited and words simply tumbled out a bit too fast.

And then something strange happened.

Unlike other times, Lady Purple Sunbird didn't seem to have anything in her beak. Unlike other times, she stayed at the nest for a long time. She clung on to the nest, at the top, where it was fixed to the climber, and moved her beak around the nest. Round and round, her beak went. For quite some time. She then hopped up away from the nest, wiped her beak against the climber and flew away.





“Strange!” I burst out aloud. I was at a loss to understand what she was doing.

Thankfully, Mr. Purple Sunbird came along just then and I immediately asked him what Lady Purple Sunbird was up to.

He looked at me briefly, shook his head in disbelief and slowly said, “You should have guessed ... wrapping of course; ... wrapping cobweb.”

“WHA—” I stopped, recalling the strange request.

Cobweb! He was right, I should have guessed!

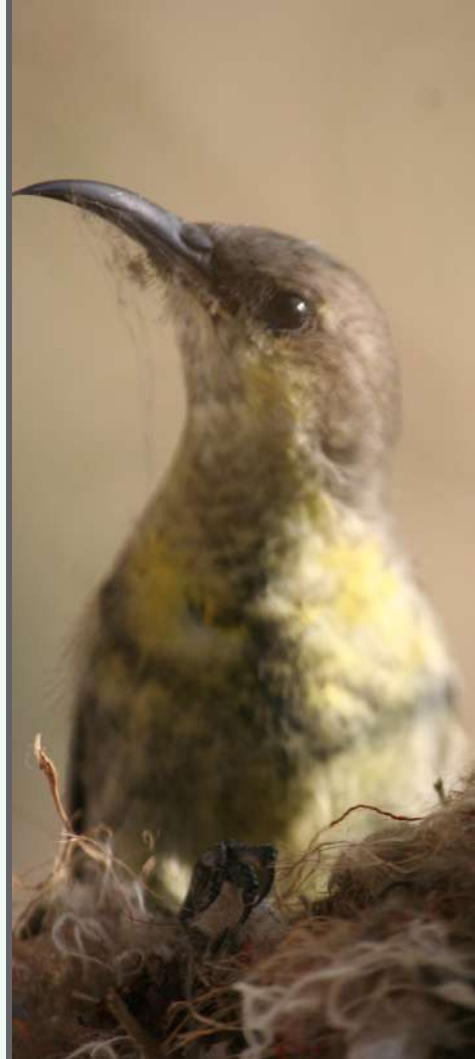
How silly of me. And how clever of her. What else could stick all the rubbish together? Cobweb! So precious to her and so completely useless to me. No wonder the other birds were unhappy with me for playing with and clearing cobwebs. I find them ugly, but these





birds find them perfectly beautiful. And should I at all clear something that was not harming me?

I glanced at Mr. Purple Sunbird. He was looking at me intently. I made him a promise, silently, which he likewise acknowledged; silently. As for the rest of the onlookers, they relaxed knowing fully well that they could now trust me to keep my promise.

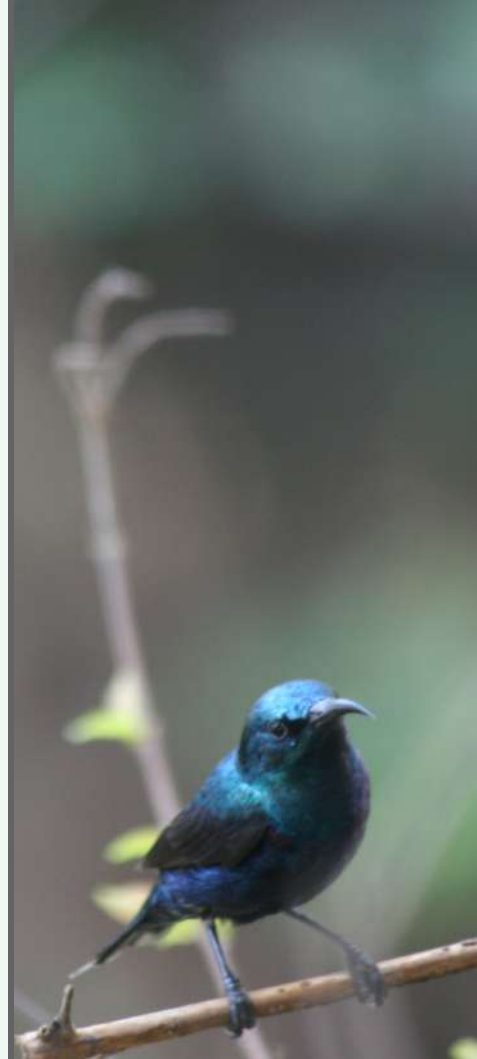




Afterword

By the time the nest got completed, in the first week of March, Mr. Purple Sunbird had acquired his full purple dress.

The Madhumalati climber (Rangoon creeper) had also acquired a lot of foliage. How clever of Lady Purple Sunbird. She had chosen the best possible place to build her nest; well hidden by the leaves and high enough to be secure from cats!





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